

The De Re Militari of Vegetius: The Reception, Transmission and Legacy of a Roman Text in the Middle Ages

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Author:

Christopher Allmand

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Everett L. Wheeler

In an age of crisis a late Roman bureaucrat offered a plan for reforming military recruitment and training to an unnamed emperor, who requested the project's continuation. Later additions on army organization (book 2), tactics and campaign operations (book 3), and siegecraft and naval warfare (book 4) yielded a compendium of ancient military thought, the *Epitoma rei militaris* of Flavius Vegetius Renatus. Over 200 manuscripts and c.100 vernacular versions attest medieval interest in the work, which, still popular in the 18th century, became the most widely read western military text until Clausewitz's *Vom Kriege* (1832). If ancient historians have repeatedly mined this text for intricacies of the Roman army's organization and tactics and to speculate on the era of Vegetius' *antiqua legio* or the *Realien* of the Late Roman army, as well as the identity of the unnamed emperor (1), medievalists have shown somewhat more reserve when assessing Vegetius' work as a crusader's manual, a handbook of chivalry, or a tactical guidebook. The full story of Vegetius in the medieval era has not been told. Thus, building on the work of Charles R. Shrader and Philippe Richardot (2), Christopher Allmand, Emeritus Professor of Medieval History at University of Liverpool, an esteemed scholar of medieval *militaria* and especially medieval military texts, has perhaps capped his career with what is likely to be the definitive study of Vegetius in the Middle Ages for the foreseeable future.

This work is quite literally the history of a book: who owned it, who read it, and readers' reactions to or use of its contents. Eschewing the nebulous, subjective approach of 'influence', Allmand goes directly to the manuscripts to find medieval reactions. Appendix two (pp. 354–66) offers a complete list of Latin

manuscripts, collections of excerpts, and vernacular translations. In part one, after an initial chapter's general remarks on the manuscripts, Allmand studies marginalia, found in two-thirds of the manuscripts but often undatable, to assess which parts of the text aroused comment and why. Regrettably, here and throughout the work, references to specific sections of Vegetius and other works can be vague.⁽³⁾ M. D. Reeve's 2004 Oxford Classical Texts edition (known to Allmand), the first with sentence numbering, has not been used, nor are statistics often documented. For example, 'the final statement in chapter 3' (viz. 1.3.5) on the superiority of rural recruits (p. 19) attracted comment in over 50 manuscripts. But (however pedantic it may seem) which 50? Scholars would want to know, but perhaps editors of a press judge such data superfluous. Petrarch's ownership of a codex containing Vegetius' text elicits a chapter of strained arguments (pp. 52–5) on Vegetius' influence on the *Africa* and the account of the Battle of Zama, but the Scipio of Veg. 3.21.31 could be Scipio Aemilianus (cf. Veg. 1.16.54; 3.11.19–21), not Africanus, and the inspiration could be from Frontinus (*Strategemata* 2.6; 4.7.16), found in the same codex. The diversity of the Carthaginian army, which is thought to be from Veg. 2.2 (pp. 54–55), more probably derives from Livy (30.33). Subsequent chapters treat the combination of Vegetius with other texts in various codices and their owners.

Part two addresses the use of Vegetius by prominent intellectuals and political figures (from John of Salisbury to Machiavelli), translations of Vegetius into vernacular tongues, drawings and illustrations in the manuscripts, Vegetius in collections of excerpts, and the early printed editions. The combination of Vegetius (the Latin text or a translation) with Frontinus' *Strategemata* or other military texts does not surprise, but apart from the text's military significance, Vegetius' tremendous influence on political thought also emerges. His emphasis on Roman training and reward for merit, besides loyalty to a sovereign from an army of non-nobles, undermined class and birth as criteria for command, laid the foundations for a centralized state whose ruler had sole legitimacy in using force in defence of the common good, and exposed the disadvantages of mercenaries. Citation and manipulation by John of Salisbury (*Policraticus*, 1159) and especially Giles of Rome in his influential *De regimine principum* (1275–77) greatly increased Vegetius' exposure in the 14th and 15th centuries, and thus Vegetius as an advocate of a centralized state assumes for western political theory a new and previously unrecognized importance, a twin pillar to his military reputation.

Further, Vegetius' stress on training, preparation, and rational calculation in war clashed with the chivalric tradition of personal glory and heroic feats, despite the translation and updating of Vegetius' text by Jean de Meun (1284) and others later, whereby the *De re militari* became a handbook of chivalry. Appendix one (pp. 348–53), invaluable for future work, catalogues translators' efforts to find vernacular equivalents for technical Latin military terms. The influx of classical ideas via Vegetius and Frontinus into the genre of chivalric handbooks produced a more secular and rational knight, as might be found in the works of Christine de Pizan (c.1364–c.1431) rather than, for example, in Geoffroi de Charny's *Livre de chevalerie* (1352). Allmand's treatment of Christine (pp. 121–7), overly influenced by a recent conference paper ⁽⁴⁾, merits a fuller discussion of Vegetius and the notion of chivalry and its handbooks. Instructive, however, is how Vegetius' comment (1.7.5) on recruiting men of proper birth and morals for the lower ranks could be read centuries later as an endorsement of the chivalric code (pp. 20, 103, 104, 227).

A long final chapter (11), which takes on the entirety of part three of the book, treats Vegetius' legacy and pulls together previous isolated threads. Here, from an ancient historian's perspective, the medievalist Allmand's relative neglect of Vegetius' late Roman context and the genre of ancient military literature comes back to haunt him. The relatively brief attention paid to the historical late Roman Vegetius (pp. 1–3) offers a conventional view, including a date under Theodosius I (r. 379–95). If Vegetius was not a military expert, he was also, however, not ignorant of the Roman army of his own time or deficient in discussing the earlier army of his sources. Vegetius did not treat infantry *in extenso* and ignore cavalry because of the infantry's greater versatility (p. 336), but rather Vegetius tried to fix what was broken. Contemporary cavalry was sufficient (Veg. 3.26.34; cf. 1.20.2).

The earliest attestations of the text derive from Constantinople, and this, coupled with Vegetius' various references to the Balkans and the Danube, suggests that he may well have been a native Latin-speaking bureaucrat in the East – a common phenomenon.⁽⁵⁾ Conceivably, the text as transmitted owes more to the

recension of Eutropius at Constantinople (dated 450) than often thought. The deletion of the name of the emperor, the work's dedicatee, an attempt to universalize a theoretical work, could date to this point in the tradition and would fit the timeless aphorisms that rendered the treatise so appealing in later periods. Omission of an imperial dedicatee's name was not conventional in ancient military treatises (cf. Aelianus Tacticus to Trajan, Polyaeus to Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus).

Similarly, Allmand has no problem with 3.26, the 'general rules of war' (*regulae bellorum generales*), which enjoyed an immense medieval and renaissance popularity and in some ways foreshadowed the often debated so-called 'principles of war'. Although Reeve's 2004 edition accepts the *regulae* as authentic, Carl Lang bracketed them in his 1885 Teubner edition as an interpolation, citing the famous tenth-century manuscript of the Greek tacticians, *Laurentianus gr.* LV-4 at folio 131, where the *incipit* to the so-called *Praecepta de re militari*, a version of Ps.-Maurice, *Strategikon* 8.2, closely recalls Veg. 3.26.1. The case for or against the authenticity of Vegetius' *regulae* has never been argued in detail and cannot be here. Some of the *regulae* recur in Ps.-Maur., *Strat.* 8.2, but not all and not in the same order as in Veg. 3.26. Indeed Ps.-Maur. *Strat.* 8.2 (a collection of maxims) may be an interpolation in that text.⁽⁶⁾ As aphoristic as Vegetius can be, composing lists does not belong to his repertoire, nor does *De re militari* contain internal references to the *regulae*. Indeed the adjective *generalis* appears only in the chapter heading to 3.26 and *regula* only twice: at 3.1.20 and 3.26.38 (*regula proeliandi*: 'the rule of doing battle'). The latter reference may have suggested insertion of the *regulae* at 3.26.1-32. Thus the original book three probably ended with the address to the emperor at 3.26.35-38. Certainly insertion of the *regulae* in Vegetius' tradition occurred at an early point. Such a list of maxims existed independent of Vegetius, which the probable interpolator of the Ps.-Maurice also consulted, although Ps.-Maurice's interpolator knew more of Vegetius than 3.26 (e.g. *Strat.* 8.2.60=Veg. 3 *praef.* 8; cf. erroneously Allmand, p. 3). In all likelihood the interpolation of 3.26 belongs to the recension of Eutropius, who perhaps also deleted the emperor's name.

The work's greatest flaw, however, comes not from Allmand's exhaustive research in the manuscripts and expert handling of the medieval material, but from a lack of appreciation of the ancient theoretical genre in which Vegetius wrote. We should not deny Vegetius any originality, but so much of that 'originality' attributed to him actually belongs to the school of thought he followed. Waging war with foresight, calculation, avoidance of battle, and the exploitation of occasion, in short, the preference for brains over brawn – all these belong to the doctrine of stratagems, which became the dominant theme of ancient military theory, subsequently copied and elaborated in Byzantine treatises (cf. Allmand, pp. 311, 316, 330). From its roots in the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides, a distinct genre developed in the fourth century B.C. in the *Strategika* of Aeneas Tacticus and various works of Xenophon. Collections of stratagems, of which Frontinus' *Strategemata* and Polyaeus' *Strategika* illustrate extant examples, evolved as a sub-genre in the Hellenistic era.⁽⁷⁾

Indeed Vegetius' rhetorical pretense (1.8.9) of distancing himself from Greek *Tactica* cannot be taken seriously. One of his sources, Frontinus, a noted philhellene, incorporated Greek theory into his own military writings, the *Strategemata* not least. As the *Strategemata* was appended to Frontinus' lost comprehensive treatise on warfare – more likely a *Scientia rei militaris* or perhaps a *de officio legati* than a *De re militari* – correspondences between the two works can be assumed. Frontinus used Pyrrhus' *Tactica* (written in Greek) and (without acknowledgement) the Greek Onasander's *Strategikos*, from which many of Vegetius' ideas (especially in book three) on the good general ultimately derive. Comparisons of Vegetius on issues of military psychology (e.g., readiness of soldiers to fight, battles from desperation, etc.) with chapter titles in the *Strategemata* demonstrate Vegetius' close reliance on Frontinus' work.⁽⁸⁾

For a medievalist Vegetius' legacy may well end with the printing press, but his *Nachleben* continued into the 18th, if not the 19th, century. Only an impression of the available material can be given. If technical advances modified Vegetius' tactical application and the availability of other ancient military texts now eliminated his uniqueness, he continued to be read as a vital part of the early modern military 'cult of antiquity', which the Chevalier de Folard's *Histoire de Polybe* (1727-30) and other works perpetuated in fomenting the column vs. line debate on infantry deployment. At least three new translations appeared, including that in English of a 'lieutenant of Marines' John Clarke (London, 1767). Turpin de Crissé's *Commentaires sur les institutions militaires de Végèce*

(1775) used Vegetius as the vehicle for commentary on contemporary affairs and – somewhat like the medieval handbooks of chivalry – found Roman inspiration for advocacy of reserving all commissioned army officer posts in the French army for the French nobility. Even Napoleon read Vegetius. In fact, the legacy extends into the 19th century. Antoine Henri de Jomini's *Précis de l'art de la guerre* (1838), the 19th-century's chief theoretical work on war until Clausewitz's *Vom Kriege* gained notoriety, betrays Vegetian influence in its conception and organization, and also features Jomini's 12 orders of battle, the progeny of Vegetius' seven.[\(9\)](#)

Allmand's study of Vegetius in the Middle Ages, despite some flaws, will be a lasting contribution to Vegetius' tradition from the 5th to the 15th century. Escaping his medieval 'comfort zone' with more attention to Vegetius himself and the genre of ancient military treatises and extending the coverage another two or three centuries would have told Vegetius' story more completely.

Notes

1. Most recently, *e.g.*, M. Charles, *Vegetius in Context. Establishing the Date of the Epitoma rei Militaris* (Stuttgart, 2007); S. Janniard, 'Végèce et les transformations de l'art de la guerre aux IV^e et V^e siècles après J.-C.', *Antiquité tardive* 16 (2008), 19–36, although neither can be endorsed in detail.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. C. R. Shrader, 'A handlist of extant manuscripts containing the *De re militari* of Flavius Vegetius Renuatius', *Scriptorium* 33 (1979), 280–305; P. Richardot, *Végèce et la culture militaire au Moyen âge (Ve-Xve siècles)* (Paris, 1998).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. At p. 195 the reference to Max Jähns, omitted in n. 174, should be: *Geschichte der Kriegswissenschaften* (Munich, 1889), i, p. 245. Jähns, still a valuable reference tool despite its date, also escaped the bibliography.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. F. Le Saux, 'War and knighthood in Christine de Pizan's *Livre des faits d'armes et de chevalerie*', in *Writing war: medieval responses to warfare*, ed. C. Saunders *et al.* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 93–105, who, with Allmand, seems unaware of the case for Christine's *Livre* as perhaps the first secular treatise on chivalry: E. L. Wheeler, 'Christine de Pizan's *Livre des faits d'armes et de chevalerie*: gender and the prefaces', *Nottingham medieval studies*, 46 (2002) 119–61. The tale of Vegetius, Christine's *Livre*, and the early printed editions of Vérard and Le Noir is more complicated than Allmand's version (pp. 246–7) indicates: see Wheeler, pp. 119–36.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See E. L. Wheeler, review of Charles (n. 1 above), in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2008.06.42 < <http://ccat.upenn.bmcrl/2008/2008-06-42.html> [2] > [accessed 25 June 2012].[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. On the *Praecepta de re militari* see A. Dain and J.-A. de Foucault, 'Les stratégistes byzantins', *Travaux et mémoires* 2 (1967) 362. A new translation of the Ps.-Maurice by Philip Rance with extensive commentary is in press.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. See E. L. Wheeler, *Stratagem and the vocabulary of military trickery* (Leiden, 1988) and, more recently, 'Polyaenus: *scriptor militaris*', in *Polyainos, Neue Studien/ Polyaenus, New Studies*, ed. K. Brodersen (Berlin, 2010), pp. 7–54. *Cf.* the much cited but often misguided J. B. Campbell, 'Teach yourself how to be a general', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 77 (1987), 13–29.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Allmand treats Vegetius' debt to Frontinus somewhat more clearly in his 'A Roman text on war: the *Strategemata* of Frontinus in the Middle Ages', in *Soldiers, Nobles and Gentlemen: Essays in Honour of Maurice Keen*, ed. P. Coss and C. Tyerman (Woodbridge, 2009), pp. 153–68.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Veg. 3.20; *cf.* Baron de Jomini, *The Art of War*, tr. G. H. Mendell and W. P. Craighill (Philadelphia, 1862), pp. 188–99. P. Richardot has treated some aspects of Vegetius' early modern legacy in scattered papers: 'L'influence de *De re militari* de Végèce sur la pensée militaire du XVII^e siècle', *Stratégique*, 60 (1996) 7–27; 'La réception de Végèce au XVIII^e siècle: Turpin de Crissé', *Stratégique*, 76 (2000) 17–51; 'La tradition moderne du *De re militari* de Végèce (XV^e-XVIII^e siècles)', in *Hommages à Carl Deroux, V: Christianisme et Moyen Âge, Néo-latin et survivance de la latinité*, ed. P. Defosse (Brussels, 2003), pp. 537–44.[Back to \(9\)](#)

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/26279>

[2] <http://ccat.upenn.bmcrr/2008/2008-06-42.html>